

1 COR 11.23-25: DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME

[Chelmsford 9 June 2013]

It has been said that “Three things indicate we are getting old. First, the loss of memory - and we can’t remember the other two”.

To which we might add that, “There is no point in worrying about forgetting things as we grow older, because we’ll soon forget what we forgot”

But, to be serious, whatever else we may forget, **there is one thing we must never forget - and that is the love of God for us all in Jesus**. Yes, we must never forget Jesus

To help us remember, Jesus instituted what the Apostle Paul called ‘**the Lord’s Supper**’. Writing to the church at Corinth, he told them that “**the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God and broke it, and said: ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me’. In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, ‘This cup is God’s new covenant, sealed by my blood, Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me’**” (1 Cor 11.24, 25)

Jesus wants us to eat bread and drink wine - “**in memory of him**”

A MEMORIAL MEAL CELEBRATING A DEATH

i) Greek & Roman ‘in memoriam’ meals

The ancient Greeks - and then later the Romans – had memorial meals for the dead. The Greek philosopher **Epicurus** left his whole estate to a philosophical school on condition that each year on his birthday there should be a meal “*in memory of him*”. From ancient literature we know that Epicurus was not alone in instituting such a meal. ‘In memoriam’ meals became very common.

But there are some very real differences between such meals and the Lord’s Supper

- The Greek and Roman ‘in memoriam’ meals for the dead were an **annual** event, whereas in the early church the Lord’s Supper was celebrated frequently. For instance, in church in Troas it was a weekly event, while in the early days of the Jerusalem church it appears to have been a daily event
- ‘In memoriam’ meals were held on the **anniversary of their founder’s birth**, and not on the anniversary of his death. This is a crucial difference. For the coming of Christ into our world would be meaningless without the Cross
- ‘In memoriam’ meals commemorated a **dead** person. Whereas we remember not just a Saviour who died for us, but also a Lord who rose for us.

ii) Jewish Passover

A much closer parallel to the Lord’s Supper is found in the Jewish Passover meal. For as we learn from Ex 12.14, the Passover too was a memorial meal. Moses said to the people of Israel: “**You must celebrate this day as a religious festival to remind you of what I, the Lord, have done. Celebrate it for all time to come**”.

And, down through the centuries, that is what the Jews have done. They have continued to remember what God did for them.

True, there are differences between the Jewish Passover and the Christian Lord's Supper. For instance, the Passover is celebrated only once a year, whereas we celebrate the Lord's Supper much more frequently

Yet in spite of the differences, there is similarity: for both the Passover and the Lord's Supper involve remembering a **death that issued in life**.

- ☐ The Jews remembered the Lord who had "**passed over**" their houses daubed with the blood of a lamb and so brought about their freedom from Egyptian captivity.
- ☐ We for our part remember the Lord who freed us from sin and death - and did so too by the blood of a lamb. "**You know**", said Peter, "**what was paid to set you free... it was the costly sacrifice** [lit: 'the precious blood'] **of Christ, who was like a lamb without defect or flaw**" (1 Pet 1.18,19)

Yes, like the Passover, the Lord's Supper is a memorial meal celebrating a death.

In breaking bread and in sharing a cup with his disciples, **Jesus commanded us to remember him by his death**. Here we learn

i) **The death of Jesus was no accident**. I find it highly significant that Jesus, before he died, realised the crucial nature of his death. No doubt the first disciples were stunned by his death. But Jesus would have said to them: '*This is no accident: this is all part of the plan and purpose of God*'. Christian theology has not sought to make the best of a bad job by attributing significance to the Cross. Before it ever happened Jesus said to his disciples: "**The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people**" (Mk 10.45). The fact is, **Jesus came to die**.

ii) **His death was the key to his life**. I find it highly significant that Jesus told us to remember him by his death, and not by any other incident in his life.

I.e. if we would understand Jesus, we must first understand his Cross.

For the Cross is the climax to his earthly ministry.

To understand Jesus, we must plumb the horror of Calvary.

Without his Cross Jesus is just another good man, and little more. CS Lewis once wrote: "*If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the last 400 years. A bit more makes no difference*". We don't need more advice, we need a Saviour

iii) **His death is the key to our life**. Without the Cross Jesus would not be the Saviour of the world. But because Jesus did die on a Cross, he is able to free us from sin and death. Because of his death on the Cross we may stand before God with chin held high - we are accepted. Because of his death on the Cross we shall live.

Here is something not only to remember - here is something to celebrate.

A MEMORIAL MEAL WITH FOUR ACTS

What precisely do we do when we remember Jesus?

What does it mean to break bread and drink wine "**in memory**" of him?

Very briefly I wish to suggest that this meal involves four acts

1. AN ACT OF REALISATION

The Greeks used to say, “*Time wipes all things out*”. Today we say: “*Time heals*”.
Sometimes it is good to allow time to heal/wipe out things from the mind
But there are certain things we should not forget, there are certain things we should remember
And Jesus and his death on the Cross is one thing we most certainly should remember.

This morning as we gather around the Table we come to realise afresh that it was “**while we were still sinners, that Christ died for us**” (Rom 5.8)
None of us are too “advanced” in the faith not to remember this.
All of us are still sinners – sinners in need of forgiveness.

2. AN ACT OF APPROPRIATION

We remember in order to once again appropriate the benefits of Christ’s death.
I.e. as we eat bread and drink wine we take possession again of the forgiveness of our sins
which the crucified Lord Jesus still offers us.

In a baptismal service I often compare baptism to a drama, a drama in which we act out our
commitment to Christ - there we identify ourselves with the Lord who died and rose for us.
Similarly ***the Lord’s Supper is also a drama, in which we are called to participate.***
We are not called to admire the bread and wine, but rather to eat and drink
The Lord’s Supper involves a physical act with a spiritual content
In taking the bread and drinking the wine, we take hold of the living Christ & say “**The Son
of God loved me and gave himself for me**” (Gal 2.20)

I don’t know what kind of week you’ve had - maybe it was a bad week in which you felt you
let the Lord Jesus down badly.
But here at the table we may once again receive his forgiveness
Paul said “**When we drink from the cup [literally ‘it’], we are sharing in the blood of
Christ. And the bread we break: when we eat it, we are sharing in the body of Christ**”
So come and share afresh in the body and blood of Jesus
Appropriate again the life-giving benefits of the death of Jesus

3. AN ACT OF ENCOUNTER

This is a memorial meal - and yet it is more than a memorial meal.
We come to meet the one who died.
For the one who died, who rose again from the dead, and is alive for evermore.

RCs & Anglo-Catholics speak of the ‘*real presence*’ - they believe in what is called
‘transubstantiation’.
Frankly I cannot see how in any way consecrated bread & wine literally become the body and
blood of our Lord.
Jesus, in saying “**This is my body/blood**” was surely saying in a dramatic way: ‘*This is what
they’re going to do to me - and what is going to happen to me is for you*’.

And yet although we may not believe in the Catholic doctrine of the 'real presence', the Lord is most certainly present here today.

In one sense he is always with us - Jesus as he was about to ascend to his Father, told his disciples: **"I will be with you always, to the end of the age"**(Mt 28.20)

However, in another sense he is particularly here with us at the Table.

It is not that he comes nearer to us, but that we come nearer to him.

As we gather around his Table we become more conscious of his presence with us.

4. AN ACT OF DEDICATION

Finally, if this memorial meal is to be at all meaningful it must end in renewed dedication.

Our remembering causes us to become more committed followers of Jesus.

In this respect the words of Ps 116.12-14 come to mind: **"What can I offer to the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will... thank him for saving me... I will give him what I have promised"**

At one stage the Latin word *sacramentum* meant a soldier's oath of loyalty to his Emperor.

This is what the sacrament of the Lord's Supper must mean to us as well.

It offers an opportunity for recommitment - for rededication.

It must be impossible to leave the Table without a deeper devotion to Christ.

Jesus said: **"Do this in memory of me"**

As in a few moments we take bread and wine, let us remember with thanksgiving the Lord who died on a Cross that we might be forgiven, who died that we might free from sin and thus from death.